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Should F&G Offer Equal Harvest Opportunity to All - Or Sell the Best Harvest Chances for More Money?

by George Dovel

In 1938, the Idaho citizen initiative establishing Idaho Wildlife Policy became law (see Idaho Code Section 36-103). That law declares that all wild animals, wild birds and fish within the state belong to Idaho and shall be perpetuated and managed to provide continued supplies for the citizens of Idaho for hunting, fishing and trapping.

Instead of obeying that law, Idaho's Fish and Game Commission has allowed all big game species, small game species and upland birds (with the exception of moose and turkeys) to decline. Rather than manage game species to offer all Idaho hunters a reasonable chance to harvest the wild game they own, F&G uses a variety of bonus hunts to allow one in 8-10 hunters a good chance to harvest scarce game while denying that opportunity to the average hunter.

Recently F&G Commissioners agreed to capitalize on the scarcity of Idaho game by advertising and selling several dozen special permits to hunt deer, elk, antelope and moose in a Fish and Game raffle. Advertised as "The hunt of a lifetime," the odds of drawing one of these coveted "Supertags", good in any hunt in Idaho, are extremely poor.

During their July 2005 meeting in Stanley, several F&G Commissioners publicly announced their support for increasing the number of big game special hunt permits given to private landowners, who would then be allowed to legally sell the permits for up to thousands of dollars each and keep the money.

Beginning with the two bighorn sheep permits that are auctioned and raffled by the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (**FNAWS**) each year, articles in this issue include the reasons used to justify each type of special bonus hunt permit. They also document the impact of these permits, both good and bad, on game populations, hunting opportunity and harvests in Idaho and other states.

Bighorn Sheep Auction and Lottery Permits

The Idaho bighorn sheep auction tag was given to the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (FNAWS), with Legislative approval in 1987, to let that group raise money to help IDFG restore Idaho's bighorn sheep populations. Selling only a few bighorn tags to hunters each year did not provide sufficient funding to pay for the transplanting, monitoring and disease control needed to rapidly rebuild declining bighorn populations.

FNAWS opted to spend nearly all of the money in a joint effort involving Washington, Oregon and Idaho to restore Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep to the Hells Canyon area and IDFG agreed. Critics argued that it was wrong to let one hunting group control the future of Idaho's wild sheep but the process was already in place and raising more money than selling sheep hunting tags provided.

Sheep Transplants Unsuccessful

From 1971-1996, 359 Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep were obtained from nine different sources and relocated in the Hells Canyon area. Most of the bighorns were imported without determining their potential for transmitting diseases to other bighorns and to domestic livestock, and the Hells Canyon bighorns suffered ongoing losses from predation and stress-related disease.

During the severe 1983-84 winter malnourished bighorns searching for food mingled with domestic sheep along the Snake River and suffered heavy losses from disease. These occurrences resulted in the Idaho Legislature amending I.C. Sec. 36-106 to prohibit IDFG from *importing or transporting* any deer, elk, antelope, moose, bighorn sheep or bison without the animals first being tested for the presence of certain communicable diseases that can be transmitted to domestic livestock.

Before taking any action to transfer bighorn sheep, the Director is required to submit a transfer plan to Senate and House leaders, and notify county commissioners and affected livestock grazing permittees. The transfer plan shall be approved, amended or rejected based on their input

In 1988, legislation required IDFG to pay half the cost of a new wildlife veterinarian employed by the Idaho Dept. of Agriculture in 1989. Beginning in 1992 F&G was required to pay $100,000 from the Fish and Game Account each year to fund disease research regarding the interaction of disease between wildlife and domestic livestock.

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I.C. Sec. 36-106 also requires IDFG to report any suspicion by Fish and Game personnel of a potential communicable disease process in wildlife to Idaho's Department of Agriculture within 24 hours. In 1991 the Legislature authorized the bighorn lottery permit to be raffled by FNAWS (or IDFG) beginning in 1992, in order to raise even more money for IDFG to solve problems between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep, or other wildlife and domestic animals.

1995 Bighorn Die-Off

Despite all of these safeguards to prevent diseased bighorns from being introduced into Idaho, in 1995 Oregon reportedly made three transplants from Alberta totaling 50 sheep without testing the animals for the Pasteurella (Pasturella haemolytica) bacteria strains that had been linked to earlier bighorn deaths. By December 1995, about 100 dead bighorns from six herds had been discovered from the mouth of the Grand Ronde River in Washington to the Imnaha River in Oregon.

Instead of admitting their failure to check the imported bighorns for presence of the Pasteurella strains and determine their history of disease, biologists and agencies involved in the transplant quickly blamed the epidemic on a feral goat that was seen in the vicinity of two bighorn sheep. Although domestic sheep have repeatedly been proven to cause pneumonia-related fatalities in bighorns in experiments where both species are penned together, similar experiments with bighorns penned with domestic goats, even those injected with the bacteria, have not resulted in pneumonia or other deaths in the bighorns.

The spread of the disease on the west side of Hells Canyon resulted in the deaths of more than 260 bighorns in an eight-week period. In the 1995-96 winter, officials netted 72 sheep and transported them by helicopters and trucks to the Caine Veterinary wildlife laboratory in Idaho. Despite intensive treatment for the disease all but eight of those bighorns died and lab tests indicated the stress of being transported actually triggered their deaths.

Expert Said Deaths Resulted From Transplants

Former Idaho State Veterinarian Dr. Bob Hillman, long recognized as an authority on wildlife-domestic livestock diseases, explained that bighorn ewes that survive the pneumonia-like disease resulting from the deadly Pasteurella strains develop immunity to the disease. But they remain carriers of the bacteria, often infecting their own offspring for several years as well as other bighorns.

The bacteria may survive up to 12 hours in moist areas such as a water hole but cannot survive more than two minutes on dry soil or vegetation, or salt blocks used by both livestock and sheep. The disease is only spread to other bighorns by the animals being close enough to touch noses or exchange mucous through sneezing or coughing.

Dr. Hillman determined that the imported bighorns included one or more animals that had built up immunity to the disease but may have transmitted it to resident bighorns on the west side of Hells Canyon. Instead of printing the facts he provided, both state and national media continued to quote the speculation provided by the agencies and groups involved in the transplants.

Environmentalists' Lawsuit Creates New Problem

In all transplants of bighorn sheep since 1989, IDFG is required to provide state and federal grazing permittees and private landowners or lessees in the area a written letter signed by all federal, state and private entities responsible for the transplant. That letter says that the existing sheep or livestock operations in the area of any such bighorn sheep transplant are recognized and that the potential risk, if any, of disease transmission and loss of bighorn sheep when the same invade domestic livestock or sheep operations is accepted.

But because the 1995 transplants took place in Oregon and in Washington, those involved apparently decided to partly ignore Idaho law. Once the sheep began dying, a coalition of environmentalist groups successfully sued the Forest Service for failing to halt all domestic sheep grazing in the National Forest before the transplant began.

In the fall of 1996 the remaining sheep grazing allotments were terminated but this created another problem for the bighorns. Grazing by domestic sheep had limited grass growth and once the practice was halted, uneaten dried grasses, including planted wheatgrass up to five feet tall, provided a tinderbox for exceptionally destructive wildfires.

These abnormally hot fires destroy virtually everything, leaving disturbed bare soil that is an open invitation to weeds. For example, the Eastside Complex wildfire in August 2000 blackened 118,597 acres, destroying stands of timber hundreds of years old that extended up and down the sides of Hells Canyon.

The bighorns' traditional forage species are being rapidly replaced with an assortment of noxious weeds, with yellow starthistle topping the list. Idaho research has verified that stress caused by drought, deep snow, inadequate forage, harassment by predators, capture and handling and other human disturbance, is a major contributor to bighorn deaths from Pasteurella microbes.

Goats Blamed For Recent Disease Outbreak

Alternate grazing by several livestock species has been the most effective method of controlling the noxious weeds, which cause millions of dollars in damage to native vegetation each year. In 2003 a new bighorn Pasteurella outbreak occurred on the Idaho side of Hells Canyon and biologists quickly blamed the disaster on a herd of domestic goats that was being used to control noxious weeds on a private ranch near the canyon rim.

No evidence was found that any bighorn sheep had been closer than several miles from the goats. Herders and guard dogs were also used to keep bighorns and other wild

animals away from the goats but bighorns occasionally travel long distances and readily mix with domestic sheep or goats on private property.

For that reason IDFG Biologist Francis Cassirer and Oregon's Vic Coggins, want to keep goats as well as sheep away from the bighorn herds in Hells Canyon and canyons of southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon. They feel that private landowners should switch to more expensive, less effective methods of noxious weed control and limit the kinds of livestock on their property.

Weed Control Too Little – Too Late

Recently, the Forest Service, BLM, Nature Conservancy and Fish and Game have used combinations of weed-pulling teams, herbicides and biological controls (insects) in their efforts to control yellow starthistle, leafy spurge, spotted knapweed, etc. on the lands they own in or near Hells Canyon. But they are losing the battle because they allowed the noxious weeds to multiply for years before they began control.

Dense infestations of yellow starthistle grow to heights varying from 6 inches to 3 feet with deep taproots. The weed prevents competition from beneficial forage species and, if eaten in sufficient quantity by horses, it causes a nervous disorder that is fatal once symptoms develop.

IDFG currently spends up to $50,000 per year, mostly income from the Bighorn Auction Tag, attempting to halt the spread of yellow starthistle on its 80,000-acre Craig Mountain Wildlife Management Area (**WMA**) above Hells Canyon. Once the hardy weed is allowed to become established, it requires several years to control and is almost impossible to eradicate.

Yellow starthistle blooms with a yellow flower (l.) and seeds (r.). Long, sharp spines develop below the flower, which limits cattle and domestic sheep consumption once the bud begins to form.

Cattle and sheep tend to avoid starthistle once the buds produce spines, whereas goats continue to browse plants even in the flowering stage. For this reason, goats have become a popular tool for controlling yellow starthistle in relatively small infestations.

Central Idaho's Wilderness Bighorns

During the past 100 years the largest concentration of wild sheep in Idaho has been the Rocky Mountain bighorns in the Salmon River back country, in or near the Frank Church Wilderness Area. In a three-year sheep study conducted there from 1949-1952, Biologist Dwight Smith recorded an average pre-lambing ratio of **75 rams and 40 surviving lambs** per **100 ewes**.

Smith felt that killing only the old trophy rams that would not likely survive the winter anyway would not adversely impact the healthy populations. In 1952 he recommended a general season hunt from September 1-14, allowing only those older trophy rams to be harvested.

Instead, the Department recommended and the F&G Commission approved a three-quarter-curl ram harvest minimum, which allowed young rams that were not even permitted by their elders to breed to be harvested by hunters. After a night or two spent on a dry hillside in hot weather most "trophy" hunters lowered their sights and killed any legal ram they could find.

But in the years when an early September storm dropped 2-3 inches of snow in the high country, the bachelor ram bands quickly single-filed down to winter range until the storm ended. During those brief periods, groups of unethical hunters sometimes killed entire bachelor ram bands when they were most vulnerable.

With no bachelor bands to follow into the high country in late March, young rams often remained with the ewe-lamb bands and inbreeding began to impact several herds. During the winter, coyotes were frequently observed chasing ewes and lambs that were coughing.

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Bighorn Studies Ignored

In March 1968, IDFG Bighorn Sheep Biologist Jim Morgan recorded a ratio of only **19 rams and 13 lambs per 100 ewes** in the same wilderness area that Dwight Smith had recorded four times as many rams and three times as many lambs per 100 ewes sixteen years earlier. Morgan was finishing a three-year study of bighorns and domestic livestock in Unit 36B and he realized the potential for restoring several thousand bighorns to the wilderness where there was no competition with livestock.

As trophy Rocky Mountain bighorn rams in the Central Idaho Wilderness became scarce during the 1960s hunters began to kill young rams that had not reached normal breeding age.

Morgan cited a well-known 1961-67 study by Dr. Valerius Geist, which documented that mature eight-year-old rams sired the lambs in healthy wild sheep herds. Geist, the undisputed authority on North American wild sheep, emphasized the importance of maintaining bachelor bands numbering from one or two to several dozen and led by mature rams.

Under the leadership of older experienced rams, these ram bands follow long established migration routes in the high country during spring, summer and early fall. The routes include selected feed sites for each season and natural escape routes from predators in the rugged terrain.

When rams are transplanted from another area, they do not know these routes through the high country and are extremely vulnerable to predation and to diseases resulting from stress caused by inadequate nutrition and excessive harassment from predators. In provinces and states with healthy bighorn herds, criteria dictate that predators must be reduced for several years when bighorns are transplanted, in order to prevent excessive losses.

Those were Morgan's recommendations to the IDFG Wildlife Bureau 35 years ago and he also urged his superiors to implement a system used in other states for harvesting desert bighorn sheep. It strictly limited the number of hunters in each area and required them to take a brief identification course, which enabled them to identify eight-year-old rams because seven-year-old or younger rams could not legally be harvested.

Instead of taking the actions recommended by Morgan to restore wilderness bighorn populations where there was no interaction with domestic livestock, IDFG chose to concentrate on reintroducing sheep into Hells Canyon as described earlier. The general sheep seasons were continued in the Central Idaho wilderness until 1971 when the current limited permit system was implemented.

Results Are Discouraging

Thirty-four years have passed and millions of dollars have been spent by the groups and agencies involved in the tri-state Hells Canyon bighorn sheep restoration effort. Since 1988, FNAWS has returned just over $1 million to IDFG as its share from the sale of 18 Idaho Auction Tags, intended to restore healthy sheep populations and harvests throughout Idaho.

Despite transplanting 474 bighorns and relocating another 128 or so in the **5.6 million-acre** Hells Canyon Project Area by 2003, the total population of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in Hells Canyon is estimated at only 900, about the same as it was 10-12 years ago. The following chart published by IDFG Bighorn Sheep Biologist Cassirer indicates that Idaho's total Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep population declined by an alarming **55 percent** from 1990 to 2000.

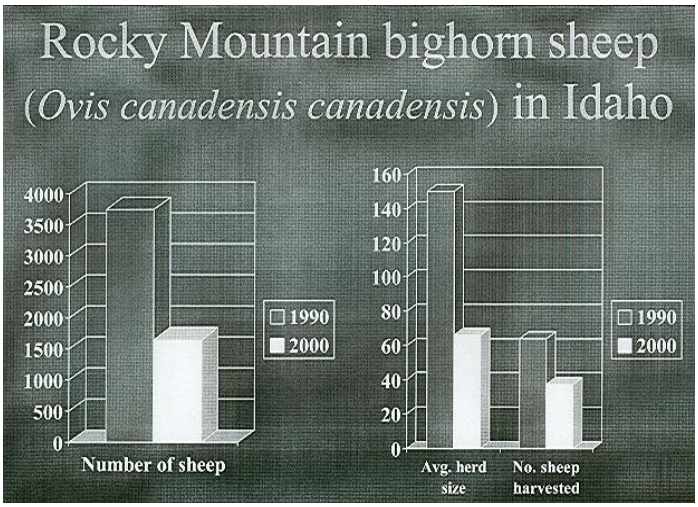

Chart published by IDFG Sheep Biologist Frances Cassirer reflects a 55 percent decline in Idaho's Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep populations and a 43 percent decline in total harvests during the 10-year period from 1990 to 2000.

Hells Canyon Bighorn Harvests

A total of 254 rams were legally harvested in the Hells Canyon Project Area during the 25 years from 1978 to 2003, but only **27** of the 254 were harvested in Idaho. And although 47 of the 254 were trophy rams scoring 180 or more points*, only **nine** of the trophy rams were killed in Idaho - all in Unit 11. (*A Rocky Mountain bighorn ram must score at least 180 points in order to be included in the Boone and Crockett trophy record book).

Of the 27 Hells Canyon rams harvested in Idaho from 1984-2003, 17 were killed in Unit 11 from 1993-2003. Unit 11 is the only one of the three Idaho Hells Canyon units that has been open to bighorn hunting since 1993 when Unit 18 was closed.

Trophy Hunting For a Select Few

Unit 11 hunting management revolves around the Craig Mountain WMA. Formerly only 17,000 acres in size, it was increased to nearly 80,000 acres in 1992 by private land purchased and deeded to IDFG as part of a mitigation package from Bonneville Power (for the habitat flooded by creation of Dworshak Reservoir).

Except for the lack of intensive predator control, Unit 11 is managed for trophy sheep hunts almost exactly the same as the exclusive "Premium Limited Entry Hunts" in Utah. From 1993-2004 only **ten** Unit 11 sheep permits have been issued to hunters in the public controlled hunt drawing and **nine** more were sold or raffled to holders of the FNAWS Auction or Lottery Tags.

Of the 19 hunters, nearly all were nonresidents and all killed a ram. Despite the addition of one more public draw permit in 2005, odds against drawing a permit during the past five years have averaged **222-to-1** and nonresident applicants exceed resident applicants by nearly **5-to-1**.

As in Idaho's "Supertag" drawings, those who buy the most lottery tickets increase their odds accordingly. If you purchased a single $10 lottery ticket in 2004, odds of your drawing the FNAWS Lottery Tag were 1 in 10,000!

Emphasis on Recreation – Not Harvest

The 43 percent statewide decline in the Idaho harvest of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep from 1990-2000 (shown in the chart on the opposite page) continued through the 2004 sheep season. Idaho's statewide harvest for the last five years, including the rams killed in Hells Canyon, averaged only 32 sheep per year.

Although Idaho biologists claim they never issue more permits than 20 percent of the mature rams actually counted in any subunit, many counts only happen once every five years. Also, instead of reporting bighorns that are actually observed, they recently adopted a bighorn "sightability" model, which allows them to claim animals that were not actually seen.

While admitting that Rocky Mountain bighorns are declining in the Salmon River breaks, Clearwater Wildlife Manager Jay Crenshaw explained, "In terms of (sheep) hunting recreation, the emphasis will be to provide a high-quality back country hunting experience. Because of the difficulty that hunters will experience in locating legal rams in some units, a somewhat lower success rate will be expected" (In Unit 27-1 the 4-yr average success rate is only 17% yet F&G added three more permits in 2005).

Excessive Predation Ignored

Crenshaw and other managers continue to ignore the problem of excessive predation, using familiar clichés and sound bites. "Low recruitment rate and overall decline in sheep numbers over the long term in these units may be caused by disease and habitat conditions," he suggests.

California bighorn sheep introduced in Owyhee County were considered a success until mountain lion predation resulted in a major decline. Annual hunter harvest dropped from 24 in 2000 to an average of only seven from 2001-2004.

Releases of California bighorn sheep in the Jim Sage Mountains Southeast of Burley in 2000 and 2001, and in the adjacent Albion Mountain range in 2003 and 2004, also suffered significant losses to mountain lions. But IDFG Program Coordinator Dale Toweill simply told the Commission the sheep had to learn to avoid lions.

Studies in British Columbia, Montana, North Dakota and Wyoming during the 1980s identified coyote predation of lambs as a major cause of mortality in bighorn sheep herds. Extensive research from many state agencies, including Idaho's Caine Wildlife Research facility, have shown that once stress triggers a Pastuerella outbreak in bighorns, recruitment will suffer for years unless action is taken to reduce ongoing lamb losses.

Wyoming Bighorns and Coyotes

From 1941-1995 the famous Whisky Mountain bighorn herd south of DuBois in Wyoming's Wind River Range provided healthy Rocky Mountain bighorn transplants throughout Wyoming and five other western states. In 1984 eight ewes and nine rams from this herd were transplanted to Unit 11 and they were the foundation for the trophy herd that exists there today.

During the winter of 1990-91 unusually deep snow, severe cold temperatures, and very strong winds for an extended period of time were indirectly responsible for an all age pneumonia die-off that reduced the Whiskey Mountain bighorn herd by 40-60 percent. The number of surviving lambs continued to decline from 44 lambs-per-100 ewes in 1990 to only 10 lambs-per-100 ewes by 1995.

In 1990 Wyoming began an intensive campaign to increase recruitment and rebuild the herd by studying and implementing habitat improvement, weed control, a reduction in domestic sheep grazing and selenium supplementation. Yet in 2002, after 12 years of sustained effort, the population had steadily declined from 1480 to 665 and there were only 10 surviving lambs per 100 ewes.

In 2003 a joint effort between the Wyoming Chapter of FNAWS and state and federal agencies resulted

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in the state Animal Damage Management Board providing funding to begin a carefully structured three-year project of intensive coyote control on the winter ranges and fall transition ranges. The first year of coyote monitoring and control in only two of the four game management units used by the herd, increased the average surviving lamb-to-ewe ratios to 26 lambs per 100 ewes in all four GMUs.

Wyoming Game and Fish approved funding for WS coyote control to continue in 2004 and again in 2005. In 2005 it also approved separate funding for lion and coyote control to prevent excessive predator losses to 20 bighorn sheep transplanted from Central Oregon into Devil's Canyon on the west side of the Bighorn Mountains.

Idaho's refusal to acknowledge that predators are the major factor limiting wild sheep recovery has resulted in populations that are still declining - with an average annual harvest of only 40 bighorns of both subspecies from 2000-2004. During the same period, Wyoming hunters harvested an average of 194 bighorn rams annually from a sheep population that is increasing.

"Embedded Dogma is Hard to Give Up"

California research biologist John Wehausen has spent 30 years in the field studying Sierra Nevada desert bighorn sheep. By 1983 increasing mountain lion numbers were killing a significant number of the scarce sheep but Wehausen advised F&G not to initiate control.

In his words, ""I came from the school that predators are not capable of having severe limitations on ungulate populations. We were taught that couldn't happen and you give up embedded dogma reluctantly."

But in the late 1980s heavy lion predation forced the sheep herds to abandon their traditional winter range and remain in the high country where winter forage was inadequate. This caused malnourished lambs not to survive and F&G began killing lions in specific areas to save the declining adult bighorns from dying out.

Lion advocates claimed mule deer had destroyed the bighorns' winter range, but once the lions were reduced the sheep returned to their historical winter ranges and began to increase. The various bans on killing lions forced F&G to get the bighorns listed as an endangered species.

This allowed F&G (or Wildlife Services) to kill any lion that killed the endangered sheep and the lion advocates were forced to agree to prevent the sheep frpm becoming extinct. Numerous studies have also documented increased lion predation on bighorns whenever mule deer populations, their primary prey, decline.

All of the bighorn transplants on both sides of Hells Canyon occurred after Dr. Geist's 1971 warning never to transplant bighorns where there was a possibility of coming in contact with domestic sheep. Transplants that formed the foundation for Idaho Units 13 and 18 and then Unit 11 occurred in 1975 and 1984, 13 and eight years before the FNAWS auction tag was created.

Recovery Area Expanded in 1997

Enactment of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (HCNRA) Act in 1975 had defined the 652,000-acre area as containing 322,000 backcountry acres of which 215,000 acres were wilderness. By 1997 most of the public lands livestock grazing in the 652,000 acres had been eliminated so state and federal agencies joined with FNAWS Chapters and other private groups to increase the size of the bighorn reintroduction area to 5.6 million acres.

The new recovery area included **1.9 million acres** of private land, with numerous livestock operations posing potential conflicts with wild sheep. The tri-state public/private groups formed the Hells Canyon Initiative (HCI) and implemented a 10-year plan to restore wild sheep, which included buying up private lands and public grazing allotments.

Hells Canyon – Success or Failure?

Despite continuing transplants of nearly 200 sheep from British Columbia, the annual growth rate has declined to six percent in the past five years. HCI's program includes importing 50 bighorns per year at an estimated annual cost of $240,000-$265,000, which does not include the cost of acquiring tens of thousands of acres of private land and public grazing rights.

In 2002 USFS announced HCI's goal of having 2,000 bighorns in the area by 2007. With less than a year and a half remaining, and only 50 transplanted bighorns added each year, that goal is biologically impossible.

Spending More vs. Proper Management

In January 2005, a FNAWS-Idaho spokesman praised the "success" allegedly achieved with the Auction Tag and claimed that funding is the only factor limiting recovery. Then FNAWS President Chuck Middleton urged the Commission not to approve two more Unit 11 sheep permits recommended by biologists because they might affect the price FNAWS is getting for their exclusive tags. The two tags were added but one went to the Nez Perce Tribe so only one will benefit hunters applying for permits.

The claim that game harvests will improve for other hunters by only allowing a select few to harvest the game is being used to justify so-called "wealth hunts" in every western state. Idaho's Bighorn Auction Tag has allowed a handful of wealthy nonresidents to monopolize trophy bighorn hunting but it has not halted the decline in bighorn numbers in Idaho.

Idaho bighorn populations in Hells Canyon Units 13 and 18 remain too low to hunt and the limited trophy hunt in Unit 11 is the result of prohibiting access to all but two sheep hunters. Hunters can still apply with 1-in-5 odds of drawing a sheep permit in Unit 27-1, but access is difficult and hunter success remains below 17 percent.

If the several million dollars spent by FNAWS, FS and IDFG in Hells Canyon had been spent wisely to restore viable bighorn herds in the Central Idaho wilderness, Idaho might be enjoying record bighorn harvests now.

The Bighorn Sheep Lottery Tag

Like the Bighorn Sheep Auction Tag, the Bighorn Lottery Tag (permit) allows the holder to hunt in Unit 11 every other year and in any other sheep unit in Idaho in alternate years. And as with the Lottery Tag, the Auction Tag does not require the purchase of a hunting license or sheep tag and both tags exempt the hunter from the once-in-a-lifetime limitation on killing a bighorn ram.

Because thousands of chances are purchased by nonresidents, including people from other countries, the odds of an Idaho resident drawing the tag are very poor. However IDFG Director Steve Huffaker, who hand draws both the "Supertags" and the FNAWS Lottery Tag, selected a resident in 2003 and 2005.

Unlike the Auction Tag, which allows FNAWS to keep only 10 percent of the money raised, FNAWS receives up to 25 percent of the gross income from the Lottery Tag to cover expenses. The remaining 75 percent must be used by IDFG to solve problems between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep, other wildlife and domestic animals, or otherwise utilized in the wildlife veterinarian program.

Biologists Opposed Disease Prevention

During the late 1990s, the F&G Southwest Region Winter Feeding Advisory Committee hired ruminant nutrition experts to develop a big game supplement block for deer elk and antelope. When properly distributed at the beginning of a severe winter, the blocks prevented the animals from forming large unhealthy concentrations and destroying crops, and provided the necessary balance of minerals and nutrients for them to survive all but the most severe winter without emergency feeding.

The State Veterinarian, and the IDFG, FS and BLM field personnel who used the blocks, enthusiastically endorsed them. But IDFG Wildlife Bureau Big Game Manager Lonn Kuck sent a memo to Regional Supervisors and Wildlife Managers ridiculing the blocks.

His memo urged them to find a way to halt their use and reminded them of the prevailing view among wildlife biologists that "animal husbandry" has no place in wildlife management. This occurred at the same time the wildlife veterinarian had initiated the use of similar mineral blocks in Hells Canyon to correct a selenium deficiency which may have contributed to sheep deaths from disease.

Research Results Cause Tensions

Using the latest techniques in cooperation with other states, the Caine Research facility and a U of I microbiologist studied thousands of samples from wild and domestic sheep, bison, antelope, elk, moose, mountain goats and domestic goats and cattle. They learned that bighorns harbor disease-causing bacteria within their own herds and also can easily be infected by bighorns introduced from other herds.

That means sheep biologists must take care to consider both the source of bighorns for transplants and the herds next to their new homes. They also learned that bighorns carry many strains of the Pasteurella bacteria and one bighorn may not be affected by the same strain that is lethal to another.

The researchers used DNA fingerprinting and DNA probes to detect how strains vary in their potential to cause disease. These tools allowed F&G biologists to check potential sheep transplants for the threat of disease transmission immediately rather than wait two weeks for cultures to identify the pathogens.

Instead of being thankful for these giant steps in preventing future die-offs, some IDFG officials resented the implication that their actions may have caused some of the disease outbreaks in Hells Canyon. For 40 years IDFG has blamed farming and grazing practices for its own failure to maintain healthy game populations.

Unwilling to replace its "don't take the wild out of wildlife" hands-off management philosophy with scientific disease prevention techniques, IDFG began generating support to eliminate its $100,000 annual payment to the Caine center. In 1999 F&G introduced House Bill 11 to halt the funding but the bill lacked support.

According to a 2000 OPE (Legislative Office of Performance Evaluations) report, IDFG then asked the Resource Committee Chairman to hold the bill so it could work cooperatively with the Caine Center. An oversight committee was appointed to reduce the tensions and select the research projects such as bighorn diseases and elk transmission of brucellosis IDFG dollars would help fund.

Signs of Progress

OPE suggested the disagreement between the agencies would continue and it has. However the FY 2004 "Hells Canyon Bighorn Sheep Progress Report by IDFG Biologist Cassirer admits that from 1997-2003 bighorn numbers have increased as high as 125 percent in herds with no transplants and have declined as much as 50 percent in herds with transplants during that period.

The initial HCI reintroduction plan has been amended to include the strict transplant criteria recommended as a result of disease research at the Caine and Wildlife Health facilities. Since 1992 net income from the Lottery Tag has generated about half a million dollars to help fund that research.

As with many of the special permits discussed in this issue the bighorn lottery tag/permit confers a special privilege on a relatively small group of hunters who are willing to pay the price and gamble against unreasonable odds for a chance to hunt. But unlike most of the others, the law that approved this funding has provided a tangible benefit to future big game populations and harvests.

Special Privilege Deer and Elk Hunts

When former IDFG Director Jerry Conley was hired in 1980, there were only **seven** controlled deer hunts in the entire state and all of them were for units with deer herds too low to support a general season. Simultaneous opening dates in general seasons regulated hunter density despite the fact there were more than **half again as many deer hunters** in the field in 1980 as there were in 2004.

In units where the harvest of antlerless deer must be reduced a short mid-October season 1-2 weeks after the buck season opened, regulated the doe/fawn harvest far more precisely than it is today. Archery hunters were given an early season in a number of strategically located units as they had been for several decades and there were no two-month-long seasons except in the back country.

In 2005 there are more deer units but there are only 12 with no open general any-weapon season and only four with no open general archery season. Yet in 2005 there are **73** controlled deer hunts offering **14,002 permits** and **six** more so-called controlled deer hunts with an **unlimited** number of permits!

Several of the units with no open general season offer more controlled hunt permits than there are applicants, with only a fair chance of harvesting a deer. But most of the 14,000+ deer permits and 22,000+ elk permits were specifically designed to provide **"special privilege"** seasons, with an excellent chance to harvest deer when they are most vulnerable, to a limited number of hunters.

To qualify for a chance to receive one of these "special privilege permits", tens of thousands of hopeful deer hunters pay extra fees and enter a lottery with very poor odds of drawing a permit. The 10% of all hunters who are lucky enough to draw a permit have a 60% chance of harvesting a deer.

56,855 Residents Give Up Deer Hunting

But for the 90% of deer hunters who either don't pay the money to enter or don't draw a permit, their odds of harvesting even a forked horn are less than half as good and getting worse every year. From 1992-2003 the number of Idaho resident deer hunters with one or more deer tags of any type declined by 56,855.

Resident Regular Idaho Deer Tags Issued

1980	155,061
1992	152,720 (does not include 1,900 extra tags)
2003	95,865 (does not include 3,115 extra tags)

Most of them quit hunting because they had no reasonable chance to harvest a deer. Instead of restoring the deer herds as required by law, IDFG and the F&G Commission chose to drive them away from hunting and approve a variety of schemes to get more money out of fewer hunters harvesting less game.

Controlled Hunts Are Not Management

With the exception of a few scarce trophy species, controlled hunts (**CH**) for deer and elk are no longer used to limit harvests. Instead they have become a tool to increase IDFG revenue by charging more money for increasing harvests when game populations are declining.

Most hunters are not aware that a significant part of the fees from controlled hunt applications and controlled hunt permits becomes IDFG license income. When a second controlled hunt drawing is held for "leftover" controlled hunt permits, it generates more income to IDFG than selling the leftover permits over the counter on a first-come-first-served basis.

Instead of automatically holding a second drawing of the applicants who failed to draw a permit the first time, F&G advertises the second drawing in the media to encourage new people to draw. This hurts the odds for those who are drawing a second time but provides more revenue for F&G.

Groups Lobby for Special Seasons

Over the past 20 years so-called primitive weapons groups and other special interest sportsman groups lobbied wildlife managers and the Commission for most of the bonus controlled hunts that exist in 2005. Instead of insisting on increasing harvest opportunity for everyone, some of these groups continue to seek new controlled hunts for their members when game is more vulnerable.

This allows them a better chance to harvest a large buck or bull without competition from general season hunters. For example, for several decades dedicated bowhunters were happy to have the opportunity to hunt ahead of the general rifle season in some units before the animals became "spooky" and difficult to approach.

But archery hunters now have the option of hunting deer and elk of either sex in a general season beginning in mid-summer in most units, and then taking advantage of both the elk rut and the deer rut in some units. Finally, in other units they have the opportunity to hunt big game in December when it is most vulnerable.

Not only does the archery kill rate increase when the animals are more vulnerable, but in many cases the special seasons allow them to kill a much higher percentage of 4-point or larger bucks and 6-point bulls than rifle hunters. Most archers oppose "choose-your-weapon" rules but as more states adopt controlled hunts by weapon type, this automatically results in "choose-your-weapon".

Following two abnormally mild winters and three years of good spring forage growth, deer harvests in some units showed substantial increases in the 2004 season. With the addition of a new antlerless deer general season muzzleloader hunt in September, Unit 39 was able to beat out Unit 1 for the highest deer harvest in any Idaho unit.

More Special Privilege Hunting

For several years blackpowder hunters have complained to F&G and the Commission that bowhunters get all of the choice hunting opportunity. In 2004 the F&G Commission approved yet another special weapons class ("Traditional Muzzleloader") to compete with the other groups who seek special privilege hunting.

With no application or special hunt permit fees to pay and no limit on the number of hunters in this 23-day September season, purchase of a $16.50 muzzleloader permit allowed the participants to kill does or fawns. They turned out in high numbers and reported a **39%** success rate, with 13% of the animals harvested being male fawns.

In the Nov. 16 - Dec. 16 controlled either-sex deer archery hunt in Unit 39, bowhunters achieved **26%** success and **73%** of the deer they killed were bucks. Further proof that increased vulnerability is the key to success is the fact that **91%** of the bucks killed had four or more antler points.

By way of comparison, the special privilege bonus bucks-only controlled hunt that is provided to 200 any-weapon hunters from Aug. 15 - Sept. 24 in Unit 39 had 52% success but only 46% of bucks were 4-point or better.

There is no biological justification for any mule deer season extending past October 31, in Idaho. Increasing IDFG income and rewarding support groups – not biology – is the motivation for these bonus, special privilege hunts.

Most elk hunting seasons are structured the same as deer seasons, encouraging hunters to spend extra money for archery, black powder and controlled hunt permits by offering them additional chances to harvest game that are not available to the average hunter.

2005 Unit 39 Hunting Seasons

Aug.1-Nov.9; – 600 antlerless elk hunters west side of 39.
Aug.15-Sept.24 – 200 CH buck hunters.
Sept.8-30 – gen season blk powder hunters does and cows.
Oct.1-31 – 1000 antlerless elk CH east side of Unit 39.
Oct.10-31 – genrl buck hunters and 1200 CH doe hunters.
Oct.10-31 – unlimited youth hunters hunt either sex deer.
Oct.10-31 – unlimited whitetail tag holders hunt either sex.
Nov.1-9 – general season any-weapon bull elk hunt.
Nov.10-30 – gen. season archers either-sex elk and deer
Nov.10-30 – unlimited WT tag archers hunt either-sex deer
Nov.16-Dec.16 – 125 CH either sex archery deer hunters.
Dec.1-31 – 600 antlerless elk hunters West side of Unit 39.

Five uninterrupted months of overlapping hunting seasons on the west side of Unit 39 and four months on the east side have a dramatic impact on hunters, private landowners and game populations and harvests.

Impact on Hunters

By the time the general hunting season opens for deer in Unit 39, many deer that are still on public lands have been shot at for 1-2 months and are already running away when the hunter first sees them. When the nine-day general elk season opens in November, most elk that are on public lands quickly head back to the private lands they have been using to escape hunters for several months.

Hunters often drive by deer and elk on posted lands and fault the landowner for not allowing them to hunt. Many of them fail to realize that if the private lands weren't closed to hunting, the extended seasons would soon make game as scarce there as it is on public land.

Impact on Private Property

As F&G allows big game to become depleted on public land this increases hunter pressure on private lands. When traditional hunting seasons are increased from one month to several months by adding a series of bonus special-privilege hunts, it often causes deer and elk to abandon their traditional summer range and move to private land prematurely.

It becomes inconvenient and costly for private landowners to conduct normal farming or ranching operations when they are invaded by hunters for several months in a row. If they don't allow hunting they can notify F&G of the increased depredation by big game which puts the problem in Fish and Game's lap where it belongs.

If F&G fails to correct the problem it caused, the landowner is entitled to recover at least part of the damage to his crops caused by the wildlife. But when hunters also trample his crops, damage fences, leave gates open, etc. the landowner is not compensated for that.

Impact on Wildlife

During late summer and early fall, natural deer and elk forage provides more than the animal's total daily digestible nutrient requirement (TDN), allowing it to expend extra energy escaping hunters and predators. But in a normal year, TDN in natural forage declines enough by mid November that deer and elk begin using up their fat reserves then.

After that time the extra energy required to avoid hunters will reduce the animal's ability to survive a severe winter. Yet Idaho big game managers continue to play "Russian Roulette" with deer and elk to achieve maximum hunting opportunity every year rather than maintain optimum body condition for maximum winter survival and reproduction.

Special Privilege Trophy Unit

The articles discussing bighorn sheep management in this issue have explained that Unit 11, containing the Craig Mountain WMA, is managed as a "trophy" unit. The odds of drawing a mule deer buck permit vary from 1-in-8 to 1-in-14 and the 4-pt. buck kill success has averaged 55%. No trophy bucks have been killed in the last 12 years

The odds of drawing a bull elk permit are 1-in-17 and the 6-pt. bull kill success has averaged 36%. One trophy bull was killed in Nez Perce County in 1998 according to IDFG trophy records.

See Special Privilege Hunts *on page 10*

Special Privilege Hunts

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The willingness of resident hunters to apply for hunts with such poor drawing odds (just to get a one-in-two chance of harvesting a 4-point mule deer buck or a one-in-three chance of harvesting a 6-point bull elk) reflects the declining number of mature animals that are available for Idahoans to harvest.

Buying a Chance To Kill Extra Game

When the F&G Commission decided to allow residents to kill a second mule deer and a second elk by paying thirteen times as much for the second deer tag and twelve times as much for the second elk tag, it established **"wealth tags"** as Commission policy. Many young Idaho working couples raising a family already cannot afford to buy big game tags and bonus special privilege hunts for all of the family members who hunt.

Yet their wealthy neighbor is allowed buy a chance to harvest two deer and elk by paying the Department the nonresident tag cost of $631.00. An August 22, 2005 IDFG News Release titled "How to take two deer or elk" says, "Hunters who are determined to stock up on meat for the winter can do so by purchasing a second deer or elk tag."

It explains that these are leftover nonresident tags that can be purchased by either a resident or nonresident, but doesn't mention the $631 tag fee or the ~$3 per gallon vehicle fuel cost or the time, effort and money required to reduce the live animals to frozen packaged meat. A July 25, 2005 News Release responded to concerns about allowing a second elk to be harvested when there is so much pressure on our elk herds by pointing out that 217 residents who bought the tags killed only 73 elk.

This type of rationale hardly satisfies the average resident elk hunter who compares his 17% chance of killing an elk with the 34% success rate enjoyed by those who can afford the special privilege wealth tags.

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If you would like a chance to win this rifle in a drawing to be held on **October 1, 2005**, please print your name and mailing address on the form at the bottom left of this page and check whether it is a new subscription, a renewal or one-year extension of an existing subscription, or a gift subscription to someone else.

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All donations must be received by Noon Saturday, Oct. 1, 2005 to be eligible for the drawing. Including a phone number will insure delivery in time for October hunting.

Should Landowner Appreciation Permits Be Sold?

How the Permits Came To Exist

In the early 1990s the Idaho Legislature established procedures and funding to prevent and control depredation by antelope, deer, elk moose, black bears and mountain lions as well as to pay damage claims if IDFG failed to halt the depredation timely after it was reported. A depredation advisory committee, subsequently called the "Fish and Game Advisory Committee," was created to act as a liaison between the various interest groups and agencies and to provide advice and recommendations concerning administration of the programs.

Six members of that committee, who generally included members of the Idaho Wildlife Council, Idaho Wildlife Federation and one or more wolf advocates, are appointed by the IDFG Director and six more, representing various agricultural organizations, are appointed by the Director of the Idaho Dept. of Agriculture. Initially the Committee recommended that one or two big game tags be given to a landowner for use by his immediate family so long as he provided hunting access to the public.

Several years ago the Committee recommended the F&G Commission provide either a deer, elk or antelope controlled hunt (**CH**) permit to a landowner with 640-4,999 acres and a second permit for a different species if he owned 5,000 or more acres. The permits were transferable to anyone and the requirement for providing hunter access was **"temporarily"** waived to encourage participation.

Some Permits Reportedly Bring a High Price

These CH permits, called LAPs ("Landowner Appreciation Permits"), are only given when some or all of the private land is included in a limited draw hunt rather than just a general season hunt. They were ostensibly intended to allow the landowner to be able to hunt on his land without depending on the "luck of the draw." but the permit covers all of the unit or units in the hunt – a much more area than is owned by the landowner.

Different landowners are allowed to receive from 10%-25% of all CH permits in the appropriate CH unit. The permits for bucks and bulls have become so desirable that landowners often compete in a separate drawing with each other to see which landowners get the coveted permits.

Many of these permits are "special privilege" hunts with the best odds of harvesting a large buck or bull. Although they cannot legally be sold to a trophy hunter, the landowner may charge whatever "trespass fee" he can get and give the permit to the hunter.

Idaho's 2005 LAPs

In 2005 IDFG allocated 3,196 LAPs to private landowners. Slightly more than one-third were for male or either-sex hunts and they include some of the most sought-after permits in Idaho.

For example, eight Unit 11 trophy buck permits and eight Unit 11 trophy bull permits were given to landowners. Statistically an Idaho hunter would have to draw for up to nine years to get one of the deer permits and 17 years to get one of the elk permits.

2005 Landowner Preference Permits

Species	Total Permits	Males or Either-Sex	Antlerless Permits
Deer	1064	386	678
Elk	1974	545	1429
Antelope	158	145	13
Total	3196	1076 (34%)	2120 (66%)

One of the best units in Idaho for a hunter to harvest a mature buck is the Nov.10-24 CH during the peak of the rut in Owyhee County Unit 40. General season deer hunters have only been allowed to kill a 2-pt. yearling buck in a 14-day mid-October season there for years and this unit is the showplace mule deer buck herd in southern Idaho.

In 2004 2,637 hunters applied for the 195 buck permits and 191 hunters killed 154 bucks, including 125 that were 4-pt. or larger. Owyhee County landowners were given 40 permits (21%) and nonresidents drew 19 permits.

For the past seven months the F&G Commission has vocally supported the concept of providing even more permits to landowners, including those with much smaller acreages, and allowing the landowners to sell the permits to the highest bidder. As this bulletin is being mailed, the Commission is conducting its third workshop with the Advisory Committee in its August 29-30 meeting in Boise.

What's Happened In States That Tried It?

In most other western States, the same pattern of providing bonus special-privilege controlled hunts to special interest groups has depleted big game populations and resulted in most or all big game being "managed" with limited controlled hunts. The end result is that large numbers of resident big game hunters are forced to take up hiking or bird watching yet the game continues to decline.

In stark contrast, states in the Midwest and East that limit big game hunting season lengths to one month or less are enjoying **all-time record big game harvests**. Recent Outdoorsman bulletins have described how many of these states quadruple Idaho's big game harvest.

Colorado was the first western state to implement the system that provides landowners a significant percentage of total controlled hunt permits and also gives them more than two months of hunting season to regulate as they see fit. Despite the Idaho Commissioner suggestion

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that smaller landowners should also be given permits, trial and error prompted Colorado to increase the minimum property size to qualify for permits to 12,000 acres.

Called the "Ranching For Wildlife Program", there are long term commitments to habitat improvement which are sometimes ignored. In order to accommodate the landowners who commit to the program for several years, the Colorado Division Of Wildlife is now forced to set big game seasons up to five years in advance.

Hundreds of angry Colorado hunters have attended a series of meetings this summer protesting an increase in the number of controlled hunt permits that are taken away from the public and given to landowners to sell to wealthy nonresidents.

Utah has a similar program, discussed in Bulletin No. 11, in which the private land hunt areas are called "Cooperative Wildlife Management Units." In a 2003 survey, residents who hunted the CWMUs charged they were limited to only 2-3 days and said game numbers claimed by landowners were exaggerated.

What Happened In Colorado?

For many years Colorado was recognized for its outstanding big game management and harvests. But a new director and Commission designed a program to increase the Division's income by adding over two hundred thousand nonresident deer and elk hunters.

To appease resident hunters and prevent overcrowding, they created an A-B-C tag system and divided all hunters into September, October or November hunts. Colorado Research Biologist David Freddy warned IDFG biologists not to adopt that system which was designed solely to increase revenue at the expense of good game management but they ignored him.

Colorado allowed the harvest of any deer, and of bull elk older than 2-1/2 years. Like Utah they exploited their mule deer first and then capped the number of hunters, which did nothing to restore deer numbers.

And like Utah they compounded their exploitation of wildlife on public lands by allowing private landowners to collect the money and manage seasons and harvests on private lands. No matter what you call the system this is simply European-style game management, which excludes all but the wealthy from participating.

After a decade of landowner hunts, both states recently cut the number of deer hunters again in another futile attempt to halt the mule deer decline. When wildlife management is left up to people whose livelihood depends on selling hunting opportunity, there is too much incentive to overharvest the resource.

As mule deer populations continued to decline in the West, private ranches in Mexico's interior and farms in Alberta began to advertise trophy mule deer hunts. Now, after only a few years, most of the bucks that remain are too small to attract wealthy hunters.

If Idaho landowners are allowed to sell the right to harvest public game on their private land for tens of thousands of dollars, there is no reason to believe many of them will not exploit the game over time the same as landowners in Mexico and Canada did.

Managing big game herds to produce an annual supply of trophy animals requires very limited harvest of male animals which is not compatible with managing for sustained yield. There is no way a landowner can produce the trophy bucks or bulls that command a high price and still allow a reasonable number of hunters to harvest game.

One of the current excuses being circulated to justify letting Idaho landowners manage wildlife is that Simplot Corporation is allegedly soliciting private landowners to lease their lands to Simplot for booked hunters to hunt on. Giving these landowners incentive to book their own hunters is certainly no solution to that perceived problem.

If the Commission would eliminate all bonus special-privilege controlled hunts for deer and elk and limit season lengths instead of hunters, the problems would cease to exist. Landowners would not need a permit to hunt game on their own property and recovering big game populations would likely utilize traditional range.

The Commission made a serious error when it gave landowners a coveted permit for an entire unit and allowed them to transfer that permit beyond family and employees. It committed another serious error when it failed to reinstate the requirement to provide hunter access.

One method used in several states to reward landowners who cultivate wildlife and allow hunting is to provide slips for hunters to sign and indicate what, if any, game was seen or killed as they leave. The landowner is then reimbursed by F&G for each slip left in a locked box and the slips are evidence of having provided access to hunters and, hopefully, some game to harvest.

Look for further discussion of "Superhunts", Landowner Permission Hunts and "Access Yes!" in the September Outdoorsman.

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